

ifth Sunday after Epiphany

February 8, 2009

Isa. 40:21-31; 1 Cor. 9:16-23; Mk 1:29-39

Introduction. "Oh, Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, and evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen." (BCP, p. 833)

This well-known and much loved prayer written by John Henry Newman is powerful in part because it lifts up the truth that life quite often *is* feverish.

In fact, the stresses and anxieties of life can lead literally to a fever. I know that when *I* am stressed, my resistance gets low; and it's not unusual for me to come down with a cold and fever.

Although anxiety can have *helpful* effects in terms the development of habits useful for basic survival, or for playing sports, or protecting our young, anxiety can also become chronic to such an extent that creative thinking is impaired, that relationships become damaged, and that our bodies become less healthy.

If we use the term "fever" as a poetic image for our chronic anxiety, then *what* can lift us back into the flow of life, back into **God's** plan for us? Today's gospel lesson brings us some very good news about this.

1. Two weeks ago we heard Mark's account of Jesus calling his first disciples. Last week we heard about Jesus' first act of *ministry*, which occurs next Sabbath day, when he and the disciples go to synagogue at Capernaum. There he amazes people with his teaching; and to top it off, he heals a man possessed by an evil spirit.

Mark concludes by reporting that the people *were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."* At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. (Mark 1:27-28)

Now comes today's story. After leaving the synagogue Jesus and his disciples went home with Peter and Andrew. Peter's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever; and after what had happened at the synagogue, Jesus' followers told him about her at once. Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her.

The cure for *our* fevers, the cure for our chronic anxieties, the cure for stresses that incapacitate us, the cure for *anything* which takes us out of the creative flow of God's future... the cure... is to be touched... to be touched by the very Source and Author of all creativity and life.

Mark is not simply telling us a nice story about the day Jesus took the hand of Simon's mother-in-law and raised her from her sick bed. He is telling us something about what kind of person Jesus *is*—not only for the people of *his* time but for people of *all* times and all places.

Mark is telling us that the compassion of Christ... is in his touch. **Our** God is the one who reaches out to those who have any kind of need. Our God reaches out and touches them with his healing hand.

Jesus touched the mother-in-law of Simon; he reached out and touched the sick and the possessed who came to be healed. He touched the eyes of the blind and ears of the deaf. He touched all those who knelt before him and raised them to their feet saying, "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace!"

But most important, Jesus reaches out and touches *us* with his healing power. He touches us on the head with water at our Baptism and makes us his own children. He touches our ears with his Word of hope and assurance.

When we are depressed, upset, discouraged or grieving he touches us with his comforting Word... the assurance that he will not abandon us in our troubles, and the promise that he will be our refuge and strength in age after age.

He touches us with words of forgiveness and the sign of the cross traced on our forehead in ashes. He touches us with bread and wine, the true body and blood of Jesus that we eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins.

Through Word and Sacrament he touches **our** sin-diseased lives... and makes us **well**. Very, very good news, indeed!

2. The first reading, from Isaiah 40, adds another dimension to this good news.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isa 40:28-31)

There are times in our lives when our own strength *is* exhausted. There are times when we are either emotionally, physically or spiritually drained... or perhaps all three at once.

We can feel weary for all kinds of reasons. We feel weary because there is tension and uneasiness in our work place. We feel weary from some kind of illness that seems to go on and on.

We are tired and exhausted because of unhappiness in our family, because we have lost someone dear, or because our finances have hit rock bottom.

We feel weary because of what old age has brought, and we long for the day when we shall leave it all behind and enter the home Jesus has prepared for us.

Isaiah is speaking to just such weary people. Fifty years before, the people of Israel had suffered a major setback in their understanding with God. Fifty years before, Jerusalem, the place of the Temple, the place where God dwelt among them, had been sacked by the Babylonians.

Fifty years before, the brightest and best of society, all had been taken captive and carted off to Babylon as political exiles. It is to these weak and weary people that Isaiah writes. He tells them...and us...about a God who reaches out and touches us in our weariness.

Isaiah sings of a God who strengthens those who are weak and tired; of a God who reaches out and touches our lives and gives us a strength that is beyond what **we** can muster up.

Conclusion. As you leave here and return to the ministry of your daily life, you can expect to encounter problems and troubles that will exhaust you.

But about the time your fever spikes and you are ready to give up,

- trust that the Lord will come along
- and lean over
- and touch you.

And in that moment,

- Jesus' presence,
- Jesus' love,
- Jesus' touch...
- can change everything.

"Oh, Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, and evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen."